

Buses and Planes

Isidor Fisch doesn't like company at the bus stop. Most days, he waits alone. Some mornings little old ladies sit and knit on the bench, then, remembering they don't need the bus after all, pack up their skeins and go. Isidor Fisch is 103, but he knows an old lady when he sees one. Some mornings, Isidor gets tired of waiting and wheels himself back home.

Having seen a century, he's in pretty good shape. He navigates the grounds in his chair, legs atrophied but arms strong. A fur blanket covers his lap on cool days and fair. He doesn't remember what he ate for breakfast, but he does remember the seam on Gerta's stockings in 1932. And, for the record, tuberculosis didn't get the better of him back in '34.

Today, a stranger wipes his boots on the edge of the bench. The smell of fertilizer and mashed May heliotrope reminds Isidor of a garden in Hopewell. A garden he set foot in once only, seventy-five years ago.

The stranger is both strange and familiar. At least he *thinks* he's a stranger. Memory itself can be strange. The stranger is dressed as a gentleman should: suit, tie, and hat, all well-cut if a bit burnt around the seams. He's younger than Isidor by generations.

“Mind if I smoke, Mr. Fisch?”

The old man bends his head in apathy. The young man produces a sterling case from his jacket pocket. The initials *BRH* glint in the sun. The young man slips a brown cigarette into his mouth and takes a deep drag. The tip crackles and glows orange, no lighter required. The old man considers this a moment, but resolves that he's seen many strange things lately. Perhaps some things only make sense in the minds of the young.

Circles of smoke rest in the air between them. First black, then red, then blue.

“We may have a bit of a wait,” offers Isidor. “This bus is often late.”

“I have time... and a story,” replies the young man.

A breeze whips around Isidor’s wheelchair, ringing like children’s church hand bells. He pulls his blanket in tight. *What cheek*, thinks the old man. *I’ve seen and done things this kid couldn’t conceive. What story could entertain me?*

“I know you’re fond of stories,” prods the young man. “In fact, *Fisch story* was coined after you.”

“Do I know you?” Isidor whispers.

Without wince or ceremony, the young man stamps the cigarette out on a faded eagle tattoo on the back of his wrist. He tosses the butt on the ground and sticks out his hand.

“I’m Bruno. From Queens by way of Old Smokey.”

The old man reluctantly meets his handshake. A jolt of static runs up through his arm, out his elbow, connects to the chair, and rebounds through his arm again. A black mark blooms on Isidor’s hand.

“You know the story, Mr. Fisch. You may even know how it ends. But, you don’t know how it feels... It’s the story of the century.”

The old man tries vainly to manipulate his chair. The wheels did not budge. He musters his composure before looking Bruno in the eye.

“I don’t remember.”

“You will.”

Bruno stretches his arms theatrically, cracking his knuckles over his head. He then settles himself comfortably on the bench.

“We’ll start in the middle, I think. Let’s see... When I finally was able to come to America, things were still very hard. Not as hard as what I suffered in the war, you understand, nor prison in Bautzen, but my wife Anna and I were very poor. And, I am ashamed to admit, I committed a few petty crimes to keep us in our flat.”

Isidor wonders which war Bruno meant, but sits silent.

“My associate, a furrier known for making good money with supplementary schemes, asked me to invest seventy-five hundred dollars. Now this was no small means to accomplish, but my associate promised hundreds of thousands of dollars in return. Time passed, and I worried that I had made a foolish investment, but I did not want to question a successful and, candidly, dangerous man. The associate asked me to keep a box safe in my home while he took a short trip. I assumed the best for my investment, reasoning I had some type of confidential collateral. Until very recently, I did not see this man again.

“Every day my wife hung her apron on a hook above the shelf where the box sat. Four months later, I read in the paper that this associate had succumbed to a disease. I opened the box, Mr. Fisch, and do you know what it contained?”

“Perhaps,” utters the old man.

“Forty thousand dollars in gold certificates,” the young man says with a smile. “Well, those certificates were then in the process of being taken out of circulation, so claiming them for myself, I quickly took advantage of the return of my investment. I bought a dark blue Dodge sedan. And do you know what happened next?”

The two men regard each other intently. To Isidor, Bruno appears to be thirty or so, certainly no older than thirty-five.

“I thought you were dead,” hisses the old man.

Bruno laughs. “I thought you were dead, too.”

Bruno takes another cigarette from his case. Again it magically lights, unaided by match.

“Now that we have the pleasantries over with,” he puffs, “I can continue our tale... Next, Mr. Fisch—that is, Isidor—one of the spent gold certificates was traced back to me. I wasn’t surprised to learn that the funds were ill-gotten. But, I must admit, I was not prepared to find that my new fortune came from the most infamous kidnapping case in the world.”

Bruno exhales. A noxious smoke cloud hits the roof of the bus shelter and disperses. The air smells of celery, olives, chicken, potato fries, buttered peas, cherries, and cake.

“Last supper,” Bruno apologizes. “It lingers.” He blows a red ring of smoke.

“Even if you can’t remember your last meal, Isidor, you’ll remember the crime. A cherub-faced toddler, darling to his parents, who themselves were the darlings of America, was taken from the nursery in the dark of the night. His father met the kidnapper’s ransom, but the boy was not returned. Ah, I see you’re feeling the story now.”

The old man’s face, in fact, is feeling a bit warm. His wrinkles began to fade and his cheeks grow plump and rosy. His bare pate stings as golden curls begin springing through his scalp. Pearly kernels of baby teeth begin cutting through. His gums, only accustomed

to rice pudding and creamed corn, swell and flush with ache. He clutches his blanket in dread and confusion, but instead of fur, he feels only thick flannel.

“It was months before the toddler’s body was discovered,” continues Bruno. “And what a state! So bad, the investigators couldn’t tell at first whether it was a boy or girl. I think that he was identified by the overlapping toes on the right foot. It must have been the right, because the left leg...”

“Stop! Stop!” screams the old man. “It was too long ago. I’m a different man...”

Bruno doesn’t flinch. “Yet, I am the same. So, we continue. It must have been the right foot, because the left leg was missing.”

Isidor’s right leg twitches as his middle toe curls and shrivels up to the shape of a petrified seahorse. His left leg, which had been spared from sensation for many years, begins to shake under the blanket. There is a rending noise as the tendons and muscles separate against the grain. A sharp crack as the thighbone snaps. A sickly slithering, like fingers combing through hot cheese casserole, and a metallic thump like the casserole dish falling downstairs. His left leg bangs against the footrest of the wheelchair. Then, just as suddenly, it is gone.

“Please stop!” he screams again.

Bruno calmly speaks on. “And both hands were missing.”

The old man flails, his face contorts in pain. The blanket slips from his grasp. His palms open, as if in a gesture of acceptance, but an unseen pressure on his thumbs keeps turning his wrists one full circle and then another. The bones in his wrists make a tinfoil crackle. His hands bend at unnatural angles. They twist and twist until they simply pop off. Explode, really —two gory Christmas crackers throwing blood and bits of bone instead of confetti.

“I’ll wait to tell you how he met his unfortunate end until after I tell you how I met mine.”

The creature in the wheelchair pants and weeps from temporary relief. He now has pudgy cheeks of a baby, blonde curls, blue eyes, one leg, no hands, and infinite fear.

“They had eight experts testify that my handwriting matched that on the demand note. They matched wood from my garage to the grain of the ladder used for the crime. And, I had those damned gold certificates which had been paid as ransom.

“No fingerprints, Isidor. No evidence except circumstantial. No motive to hurt anybody’s baby. I was no angel, but I never would have hurt a kid. Even the governor vouched for me.

“They fried me up at New Jersey State. That should’ve been you.”

The old man braces his body for an electric shock, but no jolt comes.

“Imagine this little boy, just old enough to know the words *mama* and *daddy*, scared, cold, and hurting. Taken from his warm bed to a rickety old boat in the middle of the night. Bludgeoned to death and dumped in a field four miles from home.”

The old man feels something warm and sticky seep through his new curls. A gash opens in the back of his head. It grows deeper and wider, oozing blood and greenish syrup. Isidor can taste his own brain fluid in the back of his throat.

“We dropped him from the ladder,” he cries. “It was an accident. An accident! We just wanted the money. But the package was dead before we even delivered the note. I remember now. It was an accident!”

“He wasn’t even two.” Bruno betrays no emotion. “He never had a chance to do anything but good. In two lifetimes, you and I put together couldn’t come up with two years of good.”

The old man’s bloody blonde head rolls forward against his chest. Bruno speaks once more, though he knows he is no longer heard. “The little body was badly decomposed.”

Heliotrope sprouts from the discarded cigarette. Isidor’s body turns from pink to black to green and then succumbs to the blooms. Little purple blossoms twist through the spokes of the wheelchair, covering the decay with their cherry pie scent. Bruno snaps a few and places them decorously in his buttonhole. He sits, waits, and is rewarded with the arrival of his bus: Number 35, Fresh Pond Crematory Line.

As he boards the bus, a woman in white runs toward him across the green.

“Wait!” she shouts. “This isn’t a bus stop!”

“A bus stopped for me, miss. You must be mistaken.” Number 35 pulls away from the curb and vanishes down the lane.

The woman’s companion waits for an explanation. She smooths her skirt and straightens her cap.

“As I was saying, we have many amenities here for people with your father’s challenges. We find it’s best to accommodate their delusions—only harmless ones, of course. And, well, those with dementia often feel the need to go take care of a task, to leave the facility.”

“I don’t quite follow you, Nurse Anne.”

“We erected this fake bus shelter in the garden a few years ago. It gives our older residents a destination. People with dementia can be very restless. They’re contented with the *idea* that a bus will come to take them where they need to go. After a few minutes or a few hours, they’ll have forgotten why they were waiting for a bus in the first place. It seems to be soothing for them.”

A white-haired lady pardons herself past them and perches her knitting bag on the bench.

“Where are you headed today?” the nurse gently asks.

“Home,” she says with worry. “I think I left the oven on.”

“Well, come on back if you remember otherwise, dear.”

The nurse leans over to pick up a spent butt, and spots something blue under the heliotrope. It’s a baby blanket of the softest flannel. It is spattered with little airplanes and little stars.

What a strange day, she thinks. Buses, no buses, babies, and planes. Perhaps some things only make sense in the minds of the old.